CASE SUMMARY

Complaint against Leisure and Cultural Services Department for improper procedures of handling books returned by borrowers

The Complaint

The complainant lodged a complaint against a library of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) for improper procedures of handling books returned by borrowers.

Background Information

2. The complainant discovered late last year and early this year that after her daughter returned the books which she had borrowed, the library did not delete the entries of the books from her "borrower's record" in the computer. To avoid being mistaken for not returning the books on time, she had, on both occasions, enquired at the library. However, the library staff only asked her to complete a Claimed Return Form (CRF) on behalf of her daughter. Neither did the library inform her whether it had located the books afterwards.

3. The complainant opined that there was inadequacy in the current "returning-of-books" procedures because the comupter of the library did not indicate the number of books returned by the readers. The library staff would neither confirm with the readers on the spot the number of books they returned nor issue any receipts for the books they had returned. She believed that the library staff had not looked into the matter seriously before asking readers to complete the CRF. Feeling deeply aggrieved, she lodged a complaint with this Office.

4. After repeated searches, the two books were finally located.

Information provided by LCSD

5. In 2001/02, the total number of materials borrowed from LCSD's libraries was more than 89,000,000. It was therefore impossible to issue receipts to borrowers. In the same year, there were only 8,431 "claimed return" cases and books in 5,513 of those cases were subsequently located.

6. LCSD said it would often remind its library staff to strictly follow the procedures of handling returned library materials so as to minimise errors made by its staff and avoid inconveniences caused to readers.

Observations and Opinions

7. Having investigated the case and understood the operation of the library's computer system as well as the work procedures of its staff, this Office noted that the procedures of handling returned library materials and "claimed return" cases had the following drawbacks:

(a) if the barcode scanner makes an error and gets the barcode of a piece of returned library material wrong, or if a staff member of the library does not use the scanner correctly, the entry of the returned material would still be on the borrower's record;

(b) the library would not give readers receipts when they return borrowed materials. Moreover, as the screen of the computer monitor at the circulation counter faces the library staff, readers do not have the chance to check on the spot whether the entries of the returned materials have been deleted from the borrower's record;

(c) if the computer fails to show the borrower's record correctly, the only thing a reader can do is to complete the CRF, even though he has really returned the borrowed material to the library;

(d) it is clearly stated in the CRF that "the library reserves all its right to claim any loss". Nevertheless, readers who completed the CRF would not be informed of the result of follow-up actions by the library;

(e) LCSD does not state clearly in its internal guidelines as to when unlocated items should be written off; and

(f) as a result of the above-mentioned problems, it is difficult for LCSD to give readers concerned an account of its follow-up actions or claim loss from those who have made false claims of having returned materials to the library.

Conclusion

8. In the circumstances, The Ombudsman considered this complaint

substantiated.

Recommendations

9. Based on the findings of the investigation, this Office made seven recommendations to LCSD. We suggested, inter alia, that LCSD should explain the whole incident to the complainant, reallocate resources for handling returned library materials and write-offs, enhance the functions of the computers to tie in with the necessary improvement measures, and facilitate readers in checking on the spot whether the entries of the returned materials were deleted from the borrower's record so as to avoid disputes and misunderstandings.

Comments of the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services on the Draft Investigation Report

10. LCSD responded positively to the findings of the investigation and our recommendations. The Department also undertook to strengthen training and supervision of its staff and enhance communication with readers. Moreover, it would consider applying for funds to acquire new monitors so that both the library staff and the readers could see the borrower's record on the screen.

Final Remarks

11. This Office was pleased that LCSD adhered to the customer-oriented principle in providing services to the public and responded positively to our recommendations. We hoped that it would implement the relevant improvement measures as soon as possible.

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